TREMENDOUS PART MUSHROOMS PLAY IN TERRESTIAL LIFE.

From the "On the Tip of the Tongue" Column of the New York Press.

The comparatively few mushrooms that are so wholesomely eaten give little idea what a tremendous, though mysterious part the fungi (mushrooms) play, keeping in balance terrestial animal and vegetable life. In the role of a food to man it is most aptly compared to the oyster; however, its nutritive value is even something less than that of oysters, but as a relish, appetizer, tonic, alterative, blood fillip and nervine, some say it has all these healthful qualities; just as have the indispensable family of oysters and clams. Mushrooms were probably one of the very ancient foods of primitive man, as were the shellfish. And it is not unlikely that they therefore revert the system to its older, simpler life, when foods were so much less artificial than nowadays.

Powers Over Animal Life.

The mushroom has great powers over animal life, as its poisonous toadstool varieties show; consequently its non-poisonous and wholesome qualities may be proportionately beneficial—reason or no reason. This fact is also true of the bean family, for the common bean is kin to the deadly calabar bean. Mushrooms, like oysters, are nearly all water, and although bred only from the decay of higher forms of life, are not without their own beauty of shape and color, to say naught of their indispensable role of eating up excess of the vegetable world. Besides, Sunset Cox said our institutions are favorable to the growth of mushrooms. They grow up in a night around the roots of our wide-spreading freedom.

A Cancer for Trees.

The small microscopic spores (seed) of the smallest mushrooms attack living trees almost exactly as germs plant themselves in man and grow. The wind tears off a bough or the frost weakens a root, and presently the air or water brings the ever-present fungus seed to the weak or wounded place, where it plants itself in the oozing sap and starts up a fermentation and an enzyme. A kind of pepsin follows, slowly eating up the living wood and turning it into a good food bed for the little moldy mushrooms to grow into. This goes on until the finest tree that was ever seen dies and falls, eaten and hulled out by a great fungus, cancerous crater.

Survival of the Fittest.

All fungus wounds to precious trees should be immediately painted over with lead paint, or, if old and rotting, should be cleaned out like a decayed tooth and filled with cement. Tip sees some of our precious, too often irreplaceable park citizens now bare and awaiting their green resurrection, and, though wounded by winds and saws, this lead paint salve to keep out fungi tree germs has been sadly neglected. Old, weak trees are doomed to fall without the ax, to make way too often for young, ignoble scrubs, as is happening now to the noble old chestnut groves over all this part of the country.

Two Enemies of Trees.

Man has two great enemies—himself and germs. Trees likewise have two great foes—man and fungi. But man is the greatest of tree enemies, as the deforested watershed of the Seine has been so sadly showing. If living or even dead trees could be protected from fungus and man would spare them they would be all but everlasting. But if fungus did not dissolve in enzymes, and eat up the dead and fallen trees, their trunks and branches would accumulate in such heaps as to strangle out all life, and the continent would be covered many feet deep with the bleaching skeletons of a one-time vernal world.

Feeding Land and Sea Life.

Tiny Mr. Mushroom, aided with a little moisture and his sweetish ferment, makes a fine forest bed mold of dead trees just enough. Soda and potash are two of the chief products of the mushroom's digestion of forest and leaves and dank weeds and grass. Most of this potash is greedily appropriated by the plants of another spring, but the soda rejected of earthy plants, finds its way into the salt sea, there forever to abide as sodium chlorid salt, food for sea plants, even as potash is food for land plants. Thus fungi helps feed the life of the seas, after making the bed of the forests of the world.

POISON DESTROYS FEAR.

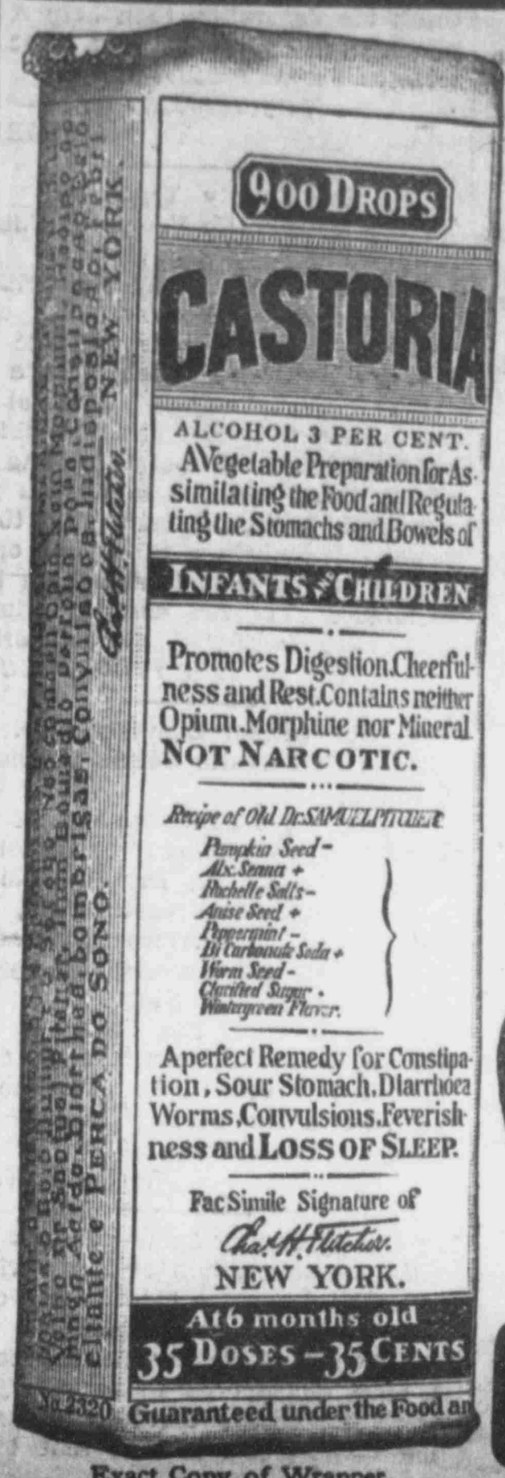
Mysterious Mixture Makes Deer, Wounded to Death, Bold.

Curari, the vegetable poison with which the Indians of the upper Amazon tip their hunting arrows, remains a mystery in its composition after a hundred years of investigation by scientists. The Indians will sell it for its weight in silver, but will not reveal the plants from which it is derived. Not long ago a professor in a German university was sent to the Amazon wilderness for the express purpose of discovering the secret, for curari, or urari, as it is otherwise called, is now thought to be of great value in medicine. The professor lived two years in Indian villages, and while he was permitted to witness the boiling of the "witches' broth," which lasted several days, he could not tell what plants went into the brew. Returning from his baffled quest down the Amazon with a quantity of the poison, the professor was met by another traveller, Dewey Austin Cobb, who had got possession of a native blow gun. The latter tells in "The National Geographic Magazine" how he put some of the professor's curari on some of his blow gun arrows, which are like toothpicks feathered with cotton, and tried it on a buck deer in the forest.

"After a deliberate aim our hunter fired," says Mr. Cobb, "if I may use such a word for the little puff, scarcely heard by us, and entirely unaudible above the rustling corn leaves at the distance of the deer. The animal gave a slight start as it felt the prick of the arrow on its flank and turned partly around, sniffing the air for a scent, and looking about as if searching for the insect that had bitten or stung it. Detecting nothing, it stood still and unalarmed. At the end of a minute, or a minute and a half at most, its head dropped a little, as if it was sleepy.

"When the hunter saw this he arose and stepped out in plain sight. The deer turned his head and looked at him, and moved forward, not away from him, a few steps and stopped. It showed no fear, but simply curiosity. After another minute the professor and I arose, and all three walked quietly to within reach of it. It made no movement to run away, but watched us intently, and shifted its position a little. Its movements seemed perfectly easy and natural. Absence of fear was the only observable change, until at the end of three minutes more; then it lay down, not falling, but as naturally as a cow or sheep when ready for sleep.

"We all approached its side, and the hunter laid a hand on its shoulder. It looked up at him, but showed no resentment or fear. Even its breathing seemed easy and natural, which surprised me, as I had heard that death resulted from paralysis of the lungs when caused by urari. At the end of ten minutes, though it opened its eyes when touched, its breath became shorter and slower. Eighteen minutes after it was struck by the arrow it was dead."—New York Tribune.



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